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Methods and Materials Used to Teach Reading in Colonial Mexico

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Significance of the Study

Reading educators in the U.S. have long had access to materials dealing with the history of teaching reading (Matthews, 1966; Smith, 1986). An understanding of education in the original 13 colonies underlies a part of the American self-concept. These historical works do not deal, however, with sections of the country that were settled by non-Anglos, notably the Hispanic Southwest. As a consequence, those who are concerned with Spanish reading instruction possess no such resource. As a first step toward creating such a reference, this paper will

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examine some of the methods and materials that were used to teach reading by some of the first Spanish colonists in Colonial Mexico.

Some readers may question the value of an historic account of teaching reading when there is still so much to be learned concerning the acquisition of literacy by second-language students (See García, Pearson, & Jiménez, 1990 for a complete discussion of this issue.) There are, however, several reasons why such an account is useful to teachers, teacher educators, and administrators who are interested in issues of multicultural and bilingual education. The first reason deals with self-concept. Although lip service is often paid to the matter of self-concept, its practical implications are not often clearly delineated. Students from linguistic and cultural minority backgrounds need to be served by professionals who have a clear understanding of the history of multicultural/bilingual education. Too often the field is viewed in ahistoric terms with roots that extend only to President Johnson's signing of the Bilingual Education Act in 1968. American educators view their historical predecesors in New England with justifiable pride. Multicultural/bilingual educators, and especially those from Latino backgrounds, need to be made aware of their own rich, educational heritage. The second reason also deals with history. Linguistic and cultural minority students and educators are seldom allowed to see themselves in either teacher education programs or in curricular materials. The all-too prevalent view that teaching and learning of literacy was not important to the indigenous peoples and the Spanish colonizers of present day Latin America needs to be challenged. The third reason is more difficult to grasp. Mendieta and Motolinia, writers from the 16th century, indicate that high levels of trilingual literacy were attained in Colonial Mexico (Their work is available in translation and modern reproductions, see Mendieta, 1945; Motolinia, 1951.). If the educational forbearers of bilingual educators were successful, perhaps there are lessons for those interested in bilingual literacy acquisition and instruction. These lessons may not directly translate into classroom plans, but they can serve as one guidepost in an otherwise often barren and sparsely-filled landscape. Whenever possible, this has been done. Many documents were found reproduced in modern sources while others were obtained in their original forms. Some documents were reprinted in collections of materials from the 16th century. While a thorough historical analysis was not conducted, the research reported here was complete enough to reconstruct one viewpoint of what reading instruction must have been like in 16th century colonial Mexico.

Picture Writing

One of the very first, and probably the most notable of the European educators to come to the newly-discovered territory, was Friar Pedro de Gante. His accomplishments and work have led some to call him "The founder of education in the New World" (Zepeda Rincón, 1933). Having received training in the humanistic ideals and linguistic insights of the Renaissance, Gante left what may very well have been a royal background to come to the Americas in 1523 in order to teach children to read (Heath, 1972).

After learning the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, Gante went on to incorporate the Indian writing system into his repertoire of knowledge. Nahuatl was the language spoken by most of the inhabitants of central Mexico and was also used as a lingua franca by many other indigenous groups. Gante mastered this skill in the city of Texcoco as a guest of the Indian nobles who resided there. After learning the language, Gante produced a fascinating book called Catecismo de la Doctrina Cristiana around 1553 (Chavez, 1943)(For a reproduction of the book, see Navarro, 1970.).

While the subject matter of the Catechism was no novelty for Gante's day, the script used to transcribe it certainly was. The Catechism was written using the pictographic system, or hieroglyphics, of the Aztecs. This picture writing, created in some ways by Gante and the other friars, was borrowed from the concept and figures used by the Aztecs, but the friars modified them so that they could be made to serve their purposes. Gante received help from another friar, Jacobo de Testera, in developing and adapting the Indians' system of writing (Valtón, 1947).

The key to the understanding of Gante's system of picture writing is that it was looser and more open to interpretation than a phonetic system (Sentenach y Cabañas, 1900). The reader of such a text was not as strictly bound to the page as are readers of alphabetic languages. Many potential reading problems, such as a reader widely diverging from the author's original intentions, were probably avoided by having the students memorize the texts before they read them (See Matthews, 1966 and Smith, 1986 for a discussion of similar methods in Colonial New England.). Memorization of the text allowed for predictable reading. Memorizing the simple texts may have speeded the pupils' learning. This would have been similar to the manner in which children today are aided in reading by having a story read over and over to them until they associate the written page with the story.

The friars probably developed their particular uses for picture writing by observing their newfound parishioners. Some zealous new converts to Catholicism wanted to make sure that they would not forget their prayers or even their sins for later confession. Using a rebus-like system they drew pictures to remember passages like the Lord's Prayer. For instance, a small flag was recorded to remember the Latin word Pater, because Pantli was the Nahuatl word for flag and sounded something like the desired word. This in turn was followed by a picture of a prickly pear, which in Nahuatl was pronounced Nochtli and reminded the user of the word Noster (Valtón, 1947). This would be similar to writing the sentence, "I saw the sun" with a picture of an eye, a saw, and the sun.

The use of a rebus system was just one of the ways that writing was put to use by the Indians and serves to demonstrate the versatility which the system possessed. The mnemonic device of using similar sounding words was commonly employed by the Aztec scribes or "tlacuilos." Such a system was picked up on by Gante and other friars as the basis for their picture catechisms and other documents. The effects this usage had on learning to read alphabetic script may have been profound. Of course, the successful learning of the students, and the fruitful teaching of the friars were firmly footed in the traditions of prehispanic literacy and probably would have been achieved with a great deal more difficulty had the different groups of Mexico not already possessed their own writing system (Kobayashi, 1974).

The Aztecs did not always arrange their writings in a rigid left-right directional manner, but Gante did. Gante also needed to create a number of new symbols to communicate the mysteries of Christianity to the natives. Many of these were not easy concepts to convey, such as the idea of the Christian Trinity. Conventional symbols were created for less concrete vocabulary like articles and prepositions (Navarro, 1970; Sentenach y Cabañas, 1900).

Gante may have used hieroglyphic writing as a bridge to teach the phonetic Roman alphabet. Since the subject matter would have been familiar to the Indians, they may have been able to master the concept of reading quickly. The catechism and all of its components were taught so as to be memorized. This was probably the quickest and most efficient route to learning the phonetic alphabet (Chavez, 1943). We know that everyone had to learn the catechism first and that this was immediately followed by reading and writing (Steck, 1943). In addition to any other benefits picture writing may have had, it was so popular that the friars used it in teaching all during the 16th century and partly into the 17th century as well (García Icazbalceta, 1968).

Some intermediary forms that show a mixture of picture writing alongside

alphabetic print have been found (García Icazbalceta, 1968). An example of mixed writing dating from about 1565, was composed in Spanish and Nahuatl in Roman letters, and also in the hieroglyphic writing of the Aztecs (this document is reproduced in Martínez & Rodiles, 1977). The message was a formal complaint written by the "indigenous officials and rulers of Mexico City against the viceroy and oidores to the Visitador General de la Nueva España." The complaint is over payment exacted for bells. It seems that the Indians of the city were forced into labor to pay for the bells and that this forced labor had dragged on for at least two years, well beyond the amount of time necessary to pay for them.

Alphabetic Script

After adapting and employing the hieroglyphic writing, Gante and the other friars masterminded the transcription of Nahuatl in Roman characters. Examples and reproductions of original documents can be seen in Icazbalceta's Bibliografía Mexicana del Siglo XVI (García Icazbalceta, 1886). The impression such an accomplishment would have made on those of the elite Indian classes who could read picture writing can easily be imagined. Quite possibly, they would have quickly recognized the new system's advantages and also been eager to learn and use it (Bravo Ahuja, 1977). Abundant testimony of the Indians' ability to write was produced shortly after the conquest (Anderson, 1946).

Gante penned his doctrina Christiana en lengua mexicana or Christian Doctrine in the Mexican language in 1547 (See Martínez & Rodiles, 1977 for a copy.). This book is an entire account written in Nahuatl using Roman letters. It contained some small illustrations and a copy of the Roman alphabet, probably because of a belief in, and use of, the spelling or alphabetic method to teach reading. This method, also used in the North American Colonies, stressed knowledge of the names of the letters of the alphabet (Matthews, 1966). After students could correctly identify all of the letters of a given word, they were expected to pronounce it. A great deal of syllable pronunciation drill also accompanied this method.

In 1569, Gante's Cartilla Para Eseñar a Leer, or primer for teaching reading, was published (Both Valtón, 1947 and Bravo Ahuja, 1977 reprint the Cartilla). It was 16 pages long and contained the alphabet, the most common Roman Catholic prayers, and some numbers. Gante made use of three different languages, Spanish (which he calls Romance), Latin, and Nahuatl written in Roman letters. The use of three different languages may have been influenced

by Gante's Flemish background, since the use of vernacular languages was pioneered in the Low Countries (Sánchez, 1944). Once again, the spelling method was most likely used to teach the contents of the Cartilla. Page two of the Cartilla is a list of syllables needed for the reading of Spanish and adapted to the use of Nahuatl. The skeletal framework of the cartilla led Bravo Ahuja, a modern Mexican educational historian, to speculate that using it to teach reading would have caused the teachers and students to be resourceful since no suggestions are offered the teacher (Bravo Ahuja, 1977).

Some form of Gante's Cartilla and others similar to it were used throughout the period of the Spanish presence in Mexico. Andrade cited a Cartilla Mayor en Lengua Castellana, Latina y Mexicana Nuevamente Corregida, y Enmendada y Reformada in 1700 (Adrade, 1899). In 1815 a teacher, Ignacio Montero, complained that the schools were still using a cartilla published in 1542 (Tanck Estrada, 1977). This particular cartilla was probably that of Fray Molina, or a variant of it, and was similar to Gante's (Tanck Estrada, 1977).

Methods and Materials for the Teaching of Reading

Different bits and pieces of information concerning the methods and materials for the teaching of reading in Colonial Mexico have survived. Motolinia, who like Mendieta was a Franciscan friar, wrote in 1536-1541 that even the Indians who had just started to learn to read could read well, and that they also wrote to each other in their own language (Motolinia, 1951). The friars and other Europeans were amazed at how many Indians became literate in Latin, Spanish, and Nahuatl. Requests were made for additional books, and this suggests that the friars recognized the importance of providing the students with large quantities of reading materials. Certain of the friars owned their own substantial libraries which were occasionally donated to the schools (Mathes, 1982). The friars themselves wrote books and materials for use in training future missionaries and for the Indians to read (Heath, 1972).

The novelty of alphabetic writing may have been a strong factor in getting people to learn how to read (Steck, 1943). If the reports about how the Indians learned to read quickly can be believed, a possible conclusion is that the astonishment the friars felt may have occurred because reading was considered either a very difficult task or an extremely uncommon activity for the average European of that day. On the other hand, they may simply have been amazed that Indians could learn to read at all. Most of the early reports, however, indicate that there were many Indians who could and did learn how to read (Anderson, 1946).

A more current Mexican historian, Gómez Canedo, has emphasized the magnitude of the task that the friars undertook. He found it difficult to understand how the friars were able to teach the Indians to read and write at all (Gomez Canedo, 1982).

Ricard, a French scholar, has brought to light some fascinating materials that were used by the Spanish teachers in Colonial Mexico. He recognized that the letters of the alphabet would have been quite abstract to the Indians and their children, and also, that this abstractness may have led the friars to devise picture alphabets to which their students could refer (Ricard, 1966). It has already been pointed out how the ancient writing of the Indians was in many respects a series of memory aids for use in remembering mundane information as well as remembering the foreign words used in prayers and religious materials.

The pictures used by the friars to teach the alphabet can be seen in a rare book written by Valadés in 1579. Here the letter A was represented by a double ladder and a compass, B by a pair of andirons and a zither, and C by a horseshoe. The imagination must be stretched a little in order to associate some of the letters with the objects chosen. For instance, the letter F was represented by a dagger, with the hilt serving as the top part of the letter. A column, fish, and tower all served to conjure up the letter I in the minds of pupils, while an L was shown as both a scythe and an ax, with their handles up and heads down. The letter V demonstrates that the friars were not entirely without humor. It was pictured as a fat man holding his rear end as his two legs rose to resemble the now familiar figure.

Ricard believed that the children may have played with the actual objects or their pictures in a way similar to how children play with alphabet blocks today. Gómez Canedo described an 18th century friar from Lima who did something similar to the 16th century friars in Mexico by giving his students the letters of the alphabet stamped on blocks of wood, as well as actual words (Gomez Canedo, 1982). Of course, it is difficult to know just how widespread such practices may have been in colonial times. That these materials did exist, however, and can be seen and examined today, provides some reason to believe that these were not simply isolated cases of innovation.

In addition to the pictures of objects which served to remind students of the letters' visual forms, pictures were used whose names began with the sound of the letter that was being taught (Valadés, 1579). Similarly, in English, we might say B is for boy, and then proceed to show a child the letter accompanied by its corresponding picture. The pictures used included some distinctly Mexican images, such as a man and woman in Indian garb and different animals indigenous to the Americas. The pictures were individually framed on a page

divided into 21 equal squares. Today a teacher would probably photocopy the page and have the children cut out the pictures and paste them to cardboard. In colonial times, it is possible that the children would have copied the pictures themselves for later use, especially since we know that the children of the elite classes were adept at drawing, this having been an important part of the curriculum in the Aztec school for the children of the nobility or the "calmécac."

For a time, then, innovative materials and progressive methods flourished and were used in the schools established in Mexico. Growing opposition, however, from the Spanish colonists diminished the effect that education could have had on the advancement of literacy. Funding for schools was cut because of complaints about the Indians' progress that were made to the Spanish royal court in Europe. Some even objected that only Satan himself could be responsible for the rapid learning that was occurring (See García Icazbalceta, 1971 for a reproduction of a letter written by a disgruntled Spanish colonist, Gerónimo de Aguilar.) While supernatural explanations are not often heard today, there are still plenty who object to programs specifically designed to benefit certain groups. The efforts made by the friars in Colonial Mexico to establish widespread literacy were noteworthy and should especially be recognized by Hispanic-American educators.

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